

## REVIEWS

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An educator with an interest in Asia-Pacific news media

# The 'widow village' and human justice

*Pacific Women Speak Out: For Independence and Denuclearisation*, edited by Zohl de Ishtar. Sydney: Women's International League for Peace and Freedom/Raven Press, 1998. 80 pp. ISBN 0-473-05666-6

SELF-DETERMINATION, land rights and human rights are still the leading issues of the day. These issues are as old as humanity itself. It's particularly more touching if the victims are the least powerful — the women and the children.

Although many women have stood up to speak out against their powerful oppressors — the big nations like the United States, France, Indonesia and Australia to name a few — there are still many cases, both documented and undocumented, that never gain coverage in the media.

*Pacific Women Speak Out* highlights some of these. Ceu Brites, for example, was at the age of 14 forced to



leave Dili when Indonesia invaded East Timor in 1975. It was a courageous escape from the bombs and guns that killed hundreds and destroyed the city.

She never saw her parents again. This didn't discourage her. The love for freedom kept her going. She kept abreast with the continued human rights abuses of the Indonesians and campaigned to get the victims' stories exposed to the outside world.

The humiliating case of the "widow village", called Kraras, where only women and children, is hard to imagine (p 47). In 1983, the Indonesian military gathered all the men and boys of the village and murdered them.

They then used the women as their sex slaves.

The women and children were trapped there. They couldn't leave and no-one could get there, other than the soldiers.

Some brave women slipped out secretly and told their stories but they were forced to return because of their children.

Many women gave birth to children conceived from the soldiers. Many of the children later became sex slaves as well in their early teens — the vicious cycle was repeated.

Rape and torture are grave human rights abuses but being a sex slave is even worse. It dehumanising — the torture of a lifetime.

Now that the United Nations has finally stepped in after twenty-four years of agony, hopefully these abuses will be investigated and treated as war crimes.

It's the only way the victims could come to terms with this and get on with their lives.

Issues in small Pacific territories and countries such as Belau, Marshall Islands, Tahiti, or even the state of Hawai'i are too easily disregarded. People used as guinea pigs for nuclear testing were never informed of its effects and very little or no help came their way.

Lijon Eknilang, of the Marshall Islands, related her story as a child

when the Operation Bravo tests were carried out. The kids in her village with the fallout that looked like "snow".

They never understood why their bodies got burnt and they felt very ill afterwards.

All the people in their village were very sick. Later they were evacuated.

People started to get sick from cancer and women gave birth to "jelly" babies — no resemblance to human beings.

The United States has acknowledged this crime to the Marshallese.

*Pacific Women Speak Out* is packed with such testimonies, some of them told with such passion and beauty. However, while important, many of these stories have been told before and something important seems to be missing from the book.

Perhaps space should have been devoted to the young girls of today — tell the contemporary stories of their experiences and what the children are facing now.